

You Shall Be My Witnesses – Supporting Immigrants in a Time of Need

So, it's been a pretty busy few weeks for me – an Israel trip, a Rabbinical Assembly convention, Purim, and many other events.

And in the next three weeks, *Pesah* and [“The Big Reveal!” at our campaign launch tomorrow](#). That's reveal, not revelation, for which we count another seven weeks after *Pesah*. :-)

Anyway, I was excited to finally be able to take a day off last Monday which I have been unable to do the last seven months – I had plans to clean my car for *Pesah*, get a cavity filled and study some Talmud when an urgent email arrived in my inbox.

It was from a leader at the [JCRC – the Jewish Community Relations Council](#) – who said that one of their partners – MCAN – the Massachusetts Communities Action Network – needed the help of local clergy.

Apparently, several immigrants who are farmworkers in Vermont (one now works in construction) were being held by ICE – the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement agency. Two of them were leaders in the [migrant workers community](#) and had been picked up by undercover agents who targeted them seemingly because of their activism.

Clergy were asked to bring their clerical garb – collars, hats, *kippot*, *tallitot*, etc. I looked at the email on my phone for a while. I thought about my admonition in last week's sermon about being informed; but it's being engaged that is important and I decided that my cavity would have to wait.

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Several hundred people including many Jews and many people who had been bussed in from Vermont were gathered outside the JFK Federal Building and were marching and singing in English and Spanish (I was sorry that I did not have my daughter or Rabbi Fel with me to translate!)



I wore my *tallit* and it and I got soaked and since I forgot my gloves and scarf, it was cold. But I was warmed by the people I met – union members, workers from Vermont, students, Jews from various synagogues and rabbis, priests and ministers.



And then the speeches: Lynmarie Deida, a U.S. citizen and the wife of one of the detainees, Alex, got up and spoke, imploring the judge to

release her husband so her family could be reunited. There was not a dry eye in the crowd as we felt this woman's suffering.



And then my friend and my wonderful colleague, Rabbi Victor Reinstein, stood up and spoke about justice. He reminded us about helping the oppressed, as the Torah teaches:

“You shall not wrong or oppress the stranger.’

“We are taught some 36 times: ‘You were strangers in the land of Egypt,’ so we, as a people, know the soul of the stranger and we need to identify with the suffering of the stranger.”

Victor, who sits with me on the executive committee of the MBR, the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis, then pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. It was a copy of a flyer from the 1970's when the MBR famously declared that nonunion grapes and lettuce were not *kosher* since they are the fruit of oppression.

View his inspiring video on [my Facebook page](#).

Then it was time for the trial to see if the detained immigrants would be released on bail. The courtroom for Immigration is tiny and they would allow only ten people from the press and ten supporters of the workers. Rabbi Reinstein and I were among those allowed into this most special *minyan* of support.

It was a great honor to sit in this small space, offering spiritual support to the family and a religious presence in the courtroom. I sat in the back with my wet *tallit* still draped on my shoulders. After some length of time, the judge came in and listened to many cases that mostly involved immigrants who had overstayed their J1 visas.

I could see the nuance of the moment – the prosecutor from the Office of Homeland Security trying to enforce the law, the defense attorneys working *pro bono* to help these people who were clearly working here and

doing jobs that most Americans, quite frankly, will not do. I empathized with the judge who had to balance all these needs – he lowered the bail for most of the detainees and tried to sort out this mess.

But when it came to Lynmarie's husband, there were other factors and the judge changed the prosecutor's request for \$21,000 bail to no bail allowed.

His wife and daughter started to cry. Now, immigration is not a simple issue and while looking around the *shul* today, many of us may be the children or grandchildren of immigrants or immigrants ourselves and I am not trying to get into a political argument here in *shul*, but make a statement about human caring and compassion.

The cries of this young mother and her four-year-old daughter were so raw, so intense. They were a reminder of all the pain in the world – the Syrian refugee who has nowhere to go, the Jew in France who is afraid to wear his *kippah*, the Palestinian who sees no hope for the future, the Israeli girl in Sderot who plays in a playground surrounded by one foot thick walls in case Hamas sends more missiles, the impoverished people I saw in Ghana a few summers ago, the poor in this country who do not have a chance at a real education or opportunity....

There are so many challenges, sometimes it is simply overwhelming.

The sadness overcame me as the tears gently flowed from my eyes.

There was nothing I could say or do – I do not even know if I disagreed with the verdict, I could just feel the suffering. This man will probably be deported and may not be able to see his wife and daughter any more.

I simply witnessed it and share this testimony with you.

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When I think of our tradition and its profound teachings, there are a couple that lie at the core of Judaism: the belief in one divine force that unites everything and everyone in a universal bond, its focus on learning, the rest of Shabbat, that we are sustained by community, that we nurture our souls with our prayer and spiritual practice, that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves and to treat those on the fringes with kindness and mercy – the widow, the orphan and the stranger, and that we should be people who work to move the world towards justice.

But there is another core teaching that is much less well known. It comes from the words of Isaiah that were in this morning's *haftarah*. God

tells the Jewish people: “*Atem Eidai* – you are My Witnesses;” we are supposed to witness God in this world. (Isaiah 44:8)

On a simple level, that means we are supposed to testify to God’s presence in the world, which gets picked up by some in the Christian tradition as speaking about one’s faith.

In the Jewish tradition, our rabbis somewhat transform this so that it centers on human beings.

As the *midrash* states in a pretty radical manner: “if you [the Jewish people] are not My Witnesses [because you stop observing the Torah and its *mitzvot*, its commandments], then, so to speak, I am not God (*Sifrei Dt.* 346).

We are required sometimes just to sit and bear witness in a courtroom and sometimes we need to march, to protest, and to demand justice.

When we think about the entire *seder* and Passover experience which will arrive in just over a week (I don’t mean to frighten you!), we think of a meal that tells a story. It is a story that begins in suffering and moves to freedom.



But it is not simply a story locked in the past. Our rabbis begged us to use it in each generation. Think of the African-American slaves who borrowed its narrative for their story of cruel slavery. And think today of the refugees who are fleeing war-torn regions around the globe or even the immigrant workers who are suffering here.

The *seder* urges us to act – add the [HIAS seder supplement](#) about refugees to your *seder*.

Yesterday, on a conference call with [HIAS](#) discussing the current challenges for refugees who are trying to come to America, I was reminded of a great teaching of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the great Boston Orthodox rabbi, who pointed out the slight shift in language from the Passover *Haggadah* to Maimonides' version of the *Hagaddah*.

The *Haggadah* states that we are supposed to see ourselves as if we just left Egypt – *livot et atzmo* – to see ourselves. Maimonides has the text as “*l’harot* - to demonstrate to ourselves.”

Thus, we can understand the entire *seder* as building to a crescendo that we “*L’harot et atzmo*,” that we demonstrate a behavior. We demonstrate that experience. We reconnect with the experience of Exodus to encourage us to act differently!

This is not just going back, but a really deep reenactment that leads us not just to feel differently, but to act differently in this world.

At the *seder*, we should consider what it was like to leave Egypt, using *Pesah* to remember what happened. But that's not enough; we should connect with friends and family to be inspired to engage together in the holy work that lies ahead.

I quoted the great 20<sup>th</sup> century rabbi and philosopher and my father's teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel last week and I need to return to him – he calls to us from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reminding us that *Pesah* is about the gift of freedom, a precious and fragile gift.

Listen to his words:

“It is dangerous to take human freedom for granted, to regard it as a prerogative rather than as an obligation, as an ultimate fact, rather than as an ultimate goal. It is the beginning of wisdom to be amazed at the fact of our being free.

“Freedom is a gift which may be taken away from us. It is [not an absolute but] a relative possession, an opportunity. We are free only when living in attachment to the spirit. The blessings and opportunities of living in a free society must not make us blind to those aspects of our society which

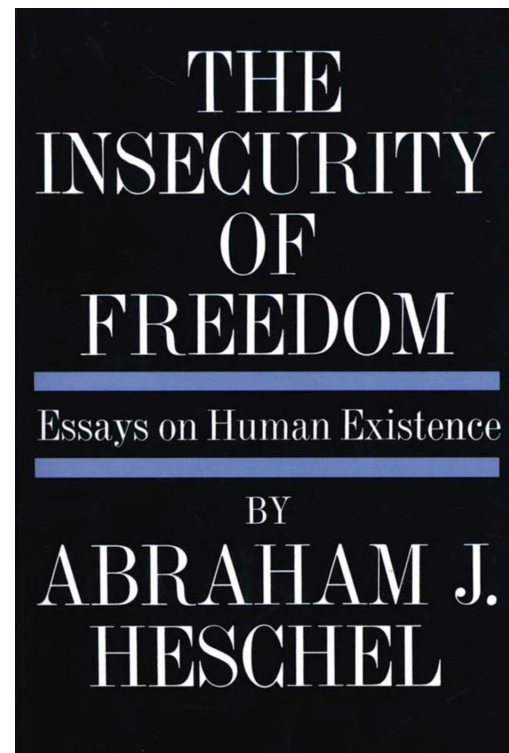
threaten our freedom: the tyranny of needs, the vulgarization of the spirit are a particular challenge.

“The insecurity of freedom is a bitter fact of historical experience. In times of unemployment, vociferous demagogues are capable of leading the people into a state of mind in which they are ready to barter their freedom for any bargain. [...]

“Unless a person learns how to rise daily to a higher plane of living, to care for that which surpasses his immediate needs, will he in a moment of crisis insist upon loyalty to freedom?

“The threat to freedom lies in the process of reducing human relations to a matter of fact. [...]

“Man to his own self becomes increasingly vapid, cheap, insignificant. Yet without the sense of ultimate significance and ultimate preciousness of one’s own existence, freedom becomes a hollow phrase.” (The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence by Abraham J. Heschel, page 18)



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We are all called upon to be God's witnesses and to see the suffering in the world and as God heard the cries of our ancestors, we too, are called upon to hear and, with the *seder* as our backdrop, to act upon this.